



CIO

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VA Participates in FirstGov Portal

By: Walter Houser, OI&T, Program Coordination Staff

VA's online feedback link is one of key government feedback pages appearing on the new FirstGov site. As a result, VA is being recognized as one of the most responsive and willing to receive feedback from our citizens wishing to share their thoughts with their government. VA involvement in FirstGov will impact on the visits and email VA receives.



To address this challenge, the Veterans Focused Internet Redesign Project (VFIRP) has accelerated implementation of the Inquiry Routing & Information System (IRIS). Located at <http://survey.va.gov/foxweb.exe/irisle?D1>, this is a One-VA approach to handling queries posted at VA websites. IRIS will encourage visitors to focus their questions to the proper VA program office.

FirstGov has been created in response to the President's December 17, 1999 memo directing the executive branch to make available all public information to citizens without their having to know which agency or department is ultimately responsible. This is being accomplished through the creation of an index encompassing all web pages published by the Federal government, a <http://Firstgov.gov> website that will access the index, and a licensing plan that allows government-focused commercial web sites to access the index for the benefit of their customers.

VA's website is a critical part of this effort. FirstGov will increase the already significant volume of queries and visitor traffic. VA employees may also receive an increased volume of email queries that may not be relevant to VA. These will need to be promptly routed to the appropriate department or agency for action. Our response to the increased volume of email will have a great impact on how the American public views the responsiveness of their government. A great start will earn us the goodwill that will be essential to the long term success of our providing appropriate services electronically to veterans.

THE CIO SCENE

By: Robert P. Bubniak, VA's Acting
Chief Information Officer



Security: Let's Do These Things NOW

Any government agency saddled with the weight of numerous GAO and OIG findings cannot let perfection be the enemy of good. Sure, some institutional improvements will take time. But for now, VA must harvest the low hanging fruit to demonstrate we are serious about improving. Security, like many other challenges, follows the 80:20 rule: The easy things are easy, but give you a big payoff. The hard things are still hard, and will come with time. So here

2. Report Security Incidents to VA-CIRC.

VA operates a security incident reporting service, called VA-CIRC, so that incidents are detected, reported, and corrected as quickly as possible. All incidents are required to be reported to VA-CIRC through your facility's security officer. Clear instructions for VA-CIRC are published at vaww.vairm.vaco.va.gov/infosec, but serious incidents still surface that are not reported. VA-CIRC is not a "gotcha" device. Damage from security incidents can be quickly contained when reported — for example when a virus outbreak occurs, or when unusual workload or performance patterns are observed on VA's network.

3. Implement VA's Strong Password Policy.

In January, VA issued a policy to strengthen passwords, particularly those for Windows NT network authentication. Weak passwords used by

**Department of Veterans Affairs
Information Security Program
[HTTP://VAWW.VAIRM.VACO.VA.GOV/INFOSEC](http://vaww.vairm.vaco.va.gov/infosec)**

are five actions VA should take immediately to get that big payoff. Some require the commitment of the workforce at large. Others require action by specific technical staff.

1. Every Employee - Take the VA-standard Awareness Course.

A Web-based service is already available to employees at vaww.vairm.vaco.va.gov/infosec. The only resource required is an Intranet Web browser and the time to take the course — usually less than an hour. Why is this important? This service has been available since March of this year, but only a small percentage of VA's workforce has taken it. Employee misunderstandings about their security role are regularly observed — opening of suspicious or virus-infected E-mail messages, poor choices for passwords, careless handling or disposal of sensitive information — to name three.

employees are one of VA's most serious vulnerabilities, easily exploited by an outside adversary on the Internet or by an inside source. In terms of demand on employees, VA's new policy is no more challenging than that used by other agencies. VA has begun to study technologies that will simplify the sign-on process for employees. But until those investments are made, this policy is the right immediate stop-gap.

4. Remove Unsecured Dial-In Connections.

In January, VA prohibited these kinds of connections. The most common example is where someone attaches to their office desktop a dial-in modem and operates a consumer-level remote access product such as PCAnywhere or LapLink. VA is not exercising a minimum standard of due diligence to protect its network as long as these kinds of connections are present. To reinforce this urgent

security measure, the Acting Deputy Secretary issued a special memo to all facility and office heads on October 13, 2000 requiring an immediate review to remove such unsecured connections.

5. Implement VA's Policy for External Electronic Connections.

VA's numerous network connections to the outside world must incorporate some simple controls listed in recently issued VA Directive 6212. This action requires that the system administrator for each connection set certain device and software switches to "harden" the connection. These controls are considered the "floor" for due diligence by industry experts. This action is particularly timely because of Congressional criticism about VA's vulnerability to attack.

Stay tuned for more on Security. It is a challenge we, together, must address.



VBA Moves Data Services to Sprint's FTS 2001 Network

By: Don Williams, VBA, Office of Information Management

The Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) announced that it recently moved all of its data services onto Sprint's FTS 2001, a move that will improve the performance of the organization's operations while saving the government money.

The move places VBA at the forefront of the federal government's transition to the government-wide FTS 2001 telecommunications network. The General Services Administration awarded an FTS 2001 contract to Sprint in December 1998 to provide voice and data service to all participating civilian and Defense agencies. VBA is the first organization of its size to move all of its data services onto Sprint's new network, which offers a wider array of services

and lower prices than previous government-wide telecommunications contracts.

"We view FTS 2001 as our backbone for future applications such as imaging which requires high bandwidth," said K. Adair Martinez, Chief Information Officer at VBA. "It will allow us to reduce costs while increasing bandwidth to better serve the VBA's customers, our country's veterans."

Working together, PEC Solutions Inc., VBA and Sprint have transitioned 109 of VBA's nation-wide sites to the new contract. These include regional offices, satellite sites, pre-discharge centers and benefits delivery centers. About 12,000 employees work at these locations.

The transition involved a total reconfiguration of VBA's wide area network. The frame relay network has been upgraded to include dynamic routing. A new backbone was added for redundancy.

As VBA's telecommunications needs grow, personnel will be able to purchase additional bandwidth and port speeds from Sprint as required. The flexibility of the FTS 2001 contract will enable VBA to purchase only the bandwidth it needs at any point in time.

"This was truly a team effort," said Tony D'Agata, vice president and general manager of Sprint Government Systems Division. "By working with our partners at VBA and PEC Solutions, Sprint has been able to offer significant savings and a host of new services to support the VBA's efforts to serve the veterans."



“Success Is Where You Find IT”

By: Carolyn Webb, OI&T, Austin Automation Center

Record-breaking crowds traveled to Austin, Texas, from all over the United States, and as far away as Australia, August 7-11, to attend the 2000 Information Technology Conference (ITC). Edward A. Powell, Jr., Acting Deputy Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), challenged conference attendees to work as partners in delivering top quality service to our Nation's veterans. He emphasized information technology as one of the most important tools available to meet the demands of the coming millennium, and encouraged attendees to discover new and creative ways to utilize innovations in technology to bring VA into the new century.

Jim Cathcart, the keynote speaker at ITC's opening ceremony, set the tone of enthusiasm and excitement that characterized the conference. Mr. Cathcart combined humor with the Acorn Principle he developed to encourage attendees to begin a journey of self-discovery and fulfillment. Attendees had a wide choice of training sessions—over 350 topics and a total of over 400 sessions. Several sessions were broadcast via satellite to VA offices across the Nation for those employees who were unable to attend. More than 30 employees participated in the Equal Access Program for visually-impaired employees, including attendees from five other Federal agencies.

One of the conference highlights was EXPO, the exhibit area, which increased this year to 175 booths, including both private vendors and VA exhibitors. Exhibitors displayed a full range of cutting-edge products and services related to information technology.

The 12th annual conference was hosted by the Austin Automation Center, and co-sponsored by the Office of Information and Technology (OI&T), Veterans Health Administration (VHA), and Veterans

Benefits Administration (VBA). All employees are encouraged to visit the ITC Web site at <http://vawww.aac.va.gov/itc> for information about the conference and topics presented. Session handouts from the 2000 ITC are available on the web site, as well as links to other sites.

VA Project to Replace Old Computer Systems Is On Fast Track

By: Susan Spurling, Office of Management

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has taken the first step in a multi-stage process to modernize its financial and logistics computer system to better serve the nation's veterans.

Under a project called “CoreFLS,” VA will replace a diverse mixture of old-technology systems with state-of-the-art integrated software that will eventually impact the work of thousands of employees throughout VA, the federal government's largest civilian agency.

The “CoreFLS” teams, made up of management, technical, procurement, and process experts throughout VA, selected Oracle Corporation to demonstrate its software products in a pilot program this fall. If Oracle succeeds in meeting VA's needs, VA will issue a delivery order to test its program nationwide. Should Oracle not perform satisfactorily, VA is under no obligation to continue with Oracle and may seek another vendor. National implementation will occur only if Oracle can demonstrate the ability to meet VA's current and future needs.

Oracle was chosen from among seven vendors based on its approach, functionality and pricing information. “CoreFLS” teams considered scalability of the software solutions, special features such as warranty and maintenance, past performance of the

vendors and their software, actual operational performance, and pricing.

For more information on the “coreFLS” project, visit the “coreFLS” Web site at <http://vaww.va.gov/corefls> .

Tracking/Reporting VA's IT Capital Investments in FMS

By: OI&T, IRM Planning and Acquisition Staff

The Financial Management System Service, at the request of the IRM Planning and Acquisitions Service (IRMPAS), has developed a numbering system that will enable IRMPAS staff to track capital investment acquisitions through the Financial Management System (FMS).

The FMS Service determined that the best way to capture obligations and costs is to use Accounting Classification Codes (ACC). This code is displayed on the FMS sub allowance budget table (SASP) and is a required data field on all obligating, receiving and payments documents, as well as payroll and expenditure transfer transactions. FMS Service has developed a specific ACC numbering structure for use with capital investment projects that reflects the type, fiscal year, and funding source for each specific capital investment. The FMS Operations Division will assign ACC numbers to all new Capital Investment Board (CIB) approved projects, including CIO Council approved IT Capital Investments, before budgeting and obligating commences. (This new numbering system will not apply to CIB-approved construction costs for major and minor construction appropriations. These expenses are identified and tracked separately from this procedure.)

The new numbering system will enable the FMS Service to track the specific budgeting and obligating data related to each CIB approved project.

IRMPAS will use the FMS-generated reports to monitor the progress of IT capital investment projects.

IRMPAS is working with the Capital Budgeting and Oversight Service and the FMS Service to make this capability available during FY 2001.

AAC Customer Survey Results

By: Lauren Kubacki, OI&T, Austin Automation Center

The AAC conducted its fourth comprehensive customer survey during the third quarter of FY 2000. A professional firm, GartnerMeasurement, a division of Gartner under contract to the AAC, designed and conducted the survey, then reported the results. The AAC scored in the top 15 percent of GartnerMeasurement's Information Technology Customer Satisfaction (ITCS) database with an overall satisfaction rating of 3.91 on a scale of 1.00 to 5.00. Only 4 of the 36 organizations in the database scored higher in overall customer satisfaction, with the highest scoring organization achieving a score of 4.09.

Survey results show AAC customers are interested in increased communications about available AAC services, future enhancements, and any changes that affect the customer. To increase the flow of communication, the AAC is contacting survey respondents directly regarding specific comments, redesigning the AAC's Internet web site to describe available products and services in greater detail, and highlighting current AAC news through articles released to various media. Detailed survey results are available on the AAC's Intranet site at <http://vaww.aac.va.gov/>.

The AAC is grateful to all VA managers and employees who took time away from their busy schedules to respond to the customer survey. The AAC is committed to providing the Department the best IT support possible and looks forward to hearing from you during the AAC's next comprehensive customer survey. In the meantime, your ongoing feedback is welcome.

Changes to Exhibit 53 Reporting for FY 2002

By: Tim Weigel, OI&T, IRM Planning & Acquisitions Service

Every year, the Department prepares a budget covering its financial plan for the future. This budget also includes a number of exhibits that provide detailed data about several areas. One of these areas deals with spending for information technology (IT) expenditures.

IT expenditures are detailed on three separate reports to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). These reports are:

- ❖ Exhibit 52 – Report on Financial Systems
- ❖ Exhibit 53 – IT Portfolio
- ❖ Exhibit 300b – Capital Asset Report

This year these documents address FY 2002 and document IT spending in various ways. Exhibit 52 focuses on spending for those systems that keep track of the Department's finances, such as the Financial Management System. Exhibit 300b provides detailed data on VA's capital investments – including IT. These two exhibits must correlate to Exhibit 53.

There are three substantial changes—beyond formatting changes—to Exhibit 53 this year. In addition to data previously reported, organizations will have to report percentages of system spending on IT security and financial management. (The latter actually may save some effort for those systems currently being reported twice—once as a financial system and again as a program support system.) Secondly, the Exhibit will include for every project a unique identifier that will remain for the life of the initiative. Lastly, OMB will be requiring these reports in an electronic format.

VA is working with OMB to use the Information Technology Investment Portfolio System (I-TIPS) as a medium for electronic exchange of these data. The long-term vision of OMB is that I-TIPS will provide the source data for information that needs to be reported on Exhibit 53.

VA's vision for I-TIPS, however, involves only capturing capital investment data for IT. Additional data will be needed to address IT budget data not subject to the capital investment process; every effort is being made to keep this to a minimum. The IRM Planning and Acquisitions Service (IRMPAS) will enter these additional data when they are supplied by organizations in response to the Exhibit 53 data call expected in early October.

VA also intends to submit data to OMB through e-mail, as we have done the last couple of years, in parallel to the I-TIPS transmission. VA will do this to ensure OMB is receiving the same data from both methods; the e-mail version will be the official version this year. For FY 2002 data, I-TIPS is only a test.

Staff from IRMPAS will be working with organizations over the next couple of months to both work through the changes in this year's Exhibit 53 and in implementing an electronic interface to OMB through I-TIPS.

Exhibit 53 data are required to be with OMB by December 15, 2000.

AAC Competitive Bid Award

By: Dee Busenlehner, OI&T, Austin Automation Center

The Department of Transportation (DOT) Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) recently awarded a 3-year contract for systems migration and technical support services to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Austin Automation Center (AAC) in the amount of \$6.9 million.

In response to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Circular 96-02 issued in October 1995, which called on the Federal government to close small data centers, FHWA began surveying mainframe costs at data centers, other than the DOT Transportation Computer Center (TCC). Also in response to OMB Circular 96-02, DOT contracted with several vendors to perform independent studies to assess the efficiency and competitive posture of TCC. As a result of these studies, Congress mandated in October 1999, in the DOT Appropriations Act, that DOT "eliminate the TCC during Fiscal Year 2000." During April 2000, DOT made a commitment to Congress to close TCC.

As a result of the preliminary planning over the past 4-5 years, and the market research analysis performed previously with dozens of private and Federal data centers, FHWA was positioned to quickly issue a request for proposal (RFP) for mainframe systems migration from TCC to another data center. The AAC responded to the FHWA RFP. The AAC's proposal provided a customized technical approach and a cost-effective technical solution to migrate FHWA's OS/390 workload from the TCC to AAC.

On May 8, FHWA signed the 3-year interagency agreement and awarded the contract to the AAC based on the best technical score and best price, coupled with high marks received from AAC customers (including VA and General Accounting Office) on past performance.

The FHWA systems were up and in full production at the AAC within 10 weeks after signing the agreement, meeting the migration schedule. According to Larry Neff, Chief, Information

Technology Division, FHWA, "This very quick migration was due to the strong customer service received from the AAC and to the advance planning conducted by FHWA." Total annual savings are expected to be between \$6-\$7 million for FHWA, and a 3-year projected savings of approximately \$20 million.

Other DOT administrations, including the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) and the Bureau of Transportation Statistics (BTS), have also joined FHWA in moving their mainframe systems to the AAC. AAC welcomes these new customers from DOT to Austin.

Additions to NPCD Intranet Site

By: Thomas M. Crase, OI&T, Austin Automation Center

The Austin Automation Center has published a web site, <http://vawww.aac.va.gov/npcd/>, to provide customers easier access to data about and from the National Patient Care Database (NPCD), the Patient Treatment File (PTF), and the various Medical District Planning (MDP) Statistical Analysis System (SAS) files. AAC staff are constantly extending the web site to include additional documentation and reports available from these systems.

The earliest version of the site included inpatient and outpatient file layouts and file naming conventions as well as a current view of the SAS format library. This view of the format library is kept current with the one used when accessing the actual SAS files. The format library is used by SAS programmers to provide descriptions for the various coded values stored in the SAS repository.

NPCD row counts were added to the site for those customers interested in seeing the actual number of occurrences of data in the various tables of the database. These counts can give an indication of size and growth rates of various subsets of the database in an easy-to-see view.

AAC staff recently added a query capability to the facility table, which will allow customers to see what facilities are valid for input to the database. Searches can be done by facility or Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN). The query shows both inpatient and outpatient facilities. A recent release included the addition of activation and deactivation dates for the facilities showing the periods for which encounters were valid.

Another recently completed effort for this web site include a browser accessible version of the daily Ambulatory Care Reports (OP reports) for those customers who find it more convenient than the mailman messages currently transmitted to the facilities.

AAC staff are continuously exploring ways to make this web site more responsive to NPCD, PTF, and MDP customer needs and desires. Feedback via the webmaster link on the site is welcome.

Hy Tech's Tip

By: Mary Granito, OI&T, Information Management Service



Do you know that it is unlawful to destroy Federal records? Before you throw that copy away, make sure that it is not an official record.

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Editor: OI&T - Kathy Ebel

Liaisons: OI&T - Chuck Fountaine
VHA - Cheryl Ludwa
NCA - Ella Demby
VBA - John Muenzen
BVA - Jim Jensen

WWW Support:
OI&T - Walt Houser